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ABSTRACT

Some of the essential elements of educational partnerships and what it takes for these associations to succeed are presented. The brief opens by describing the growing trend of companies working in partnership with one another to improve education by sharing expertise, leveraging limited resources, broadening markets, and tackling complex issues. The text looks at the various kinds of associations, such as limited partnerships, coalition partnerships, and collaborative partnerships, and how these strategic relationships still allow organizations to retain substantial independence. The steps to partnering are discussed, as are the reasons organizations should work together, including an enhanced ability to do more with less, to better meet shifting needs and conditions, to create new markets, and to form professional learning communities. Elements that contribute to a successful partnership include establishing a clear, shared sense of direction; adapting leadership to fit the structure; encouraging interactivity throughout the system; moving from competition toward collaboration; communicating frequently and effectively; investing time; building strategic relationships; learning while doing; and assessing progress. A chart detailing the different ways to create partnerships is provided. (RJM)

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What It Takes to Work Together: The Promise of Educational Partnerships

BethAnn Berliner

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In Utah, six school districts, Weber State University and WestEd comprise the Student Success Alliance. Originally formed to address instructional issues for second-language learners, the Alliance now also focuses on improving the uses of technology in classrooms. In Arizona, the Southern Arizona Bilingual Education Consortium brings together 14 school districts, Pima Community College and WestEd to ensure that assessments are culturally and linguistically appropriate for mono-lingual, Spanish-speaking students. In California, WestEd and several other organizations created the Policy Web Collaborative to share analyses on current educational topics. And in Nevada, a long-standing relationship with Nevada administrators links WestEd to the Alliance of Rural Schools.

What has spurred these organizations to work together? What promise do educational partnerships such as these hold? Drawing from a multi-disciplinary knowledge base and WestEd's own efforts to form and participate in various partnerships, we're gaining a clearer picture of the essential elements of working partnerships and what it takes for them to succeed.

* * *

Introduction

In recent years a trend has emerged in which organizations of all types — from corporations to mid-sized research and development firms to local nonprofits and schools — are working in partnership with one another to improve education through sharing expertise, leveraging limited resources, broadening markets and tackling issues too intractable to face alone. But for these partnerships to result in better ways of working, organizations need more than convincing reasons to work together. They must understand the implications of these new structures and have practical information about what it takes for them to succeed.

Chief catalysts of this movement are new legislation requiring organizations to work together and a decades-long reckoning with the complexity of broad-scale school reform. The prevailing wisdom is that no single organization can transform schools into successful learning communities. To work together, educators have conceived alliances, networks, coalitions, consortia, cooperatives, collaborations, virtual relationships, councils, federations, compact agencies and other partnering arrangements. Most are school- or district-based, connecting practitioners to pursue joint work in areas such as curriculum and assessment reform, coordinated social services or school-to-work transitions. Others aim to build systems of support for schools, bringing pockets of excellence to scale by adapting research and practice to local contexts.

Behind this movement are also lessons learned from observing some of the world's mightiest organizations. As different as our work is from that of IBM, Sears, Volkswagen or Citicorp, their struggles to maintain their share of the international marketplace and their subsequent efforts to reorganize to become more competitive have taught us about ways to work together and how to adapt to new notions of success. These corporate giants and others found that in the new global economy they were unable to adapt quickly. The rigid hierarchical structure and specialization of tasks that had once helped them to dominate their spheres were antithetical to partnering and constrained speed, flexibility, integration and innovation—the new hallmarks of success. To succeed in a rapidly changing world, they needed a profoundly new approach to doing business.

As the basis for competitive success continues to shift with the

explosion of information and growth in the global economy, more and more businesses and organizations are rethinking traditional ways of working and grappling with what it takes to reorganize for the postmodern period. To thrive, they're looking to other organizations to help them to become more efficient and effective.

Now, recognizing the advantages of partnerships, educational organizations too are forging themselves into new enterprises. *What It Takes to Work Together: The Promise of Educational Partnerships* explores the reasons behind the new partnerships, how they're structured and what makes them succeed.

Making Sense of Partnerships

Partnerships are strategic relationships among organizations that retain substantial independence. They're formed when organizations identify common concerns and work together to achieve specific ends and mutual gains. Working together is a pragmatic endeavor; it's a way of organizing work that wouldn't be accomplished as effectively or efficiently by a single organization.

But few organizations have really begun grappling with what it means to work together. Observers of organizational change and educators are beginning to understand this phenomenon by viewing it through one of two related lenses: the first focuses on general structural attributes of partnerships and the second focuses on requisite actions and skills to form and sustain them.

Studies of educational partnerships (Tushnet, 1993) have identified three general types of organizational structures:

Limited Partnerships. These are relationships in which lead organizations work with others to provide services or products to themselves or to clients. The limited partners function similarly to consultants, sharing expertise and other resources on an as needed basis. Because the vision and agenda are set by the lead organizations, limited partnerships don't easily shift from the issues around which they were formed to new ones. An example is a district-wide volunteer tutoring program in which the district, as the primary partner, forms a partnership by working with community groups to build a pool of volunteers, content specialists to design the program, and staff developers to design and deliver training and support.

Coalition Partnerships. These structures bring together organizations with complementary skills, interests, and concerns and involves a division of labor among equal partners. For example, a school-to-work partnership includes all high schools in a district, business leaders, community-based job training and employment programs, a community college, and a state university. Coalition partnerships form around a specific problem, like improving workplace readiness skills, while allowing for partners to differ in their goals and explanations of the causes of the problem.

Collaborative Partnerships. The genesis of these structures is two fold: a mutual concern about specific problems and a shared confusion about how to advance solutions. Collaborative partnerships involve multiple organizations working together in ways that divide labor equally, promote democratic and continuous decision-making, and allow for co-mingling of funds. Collaborative partners formalize their relations through interagency agreements and shared responsibility for achieving common goals and can readily shift their focus and activities to address new concerns. An example is a team of educators, social service providers, and health practitioners, co-located at nearly 50 school sites, who jointly design and deliver comprehensive ser-

Steps to Partnering

1. Identify a shared concern about a real problem.
2. Find the right mix of participants.
3. Develop an appropriate organizational structure.
4. Specify the roles and responsibilities of leaders and participants.
5. Carry out the partnership's activities.
6. Evaluate the partnership's structure and activities.
7. Confront problems and use them as opportunities to build relationships among partners.

vices to students, including: health care, counseling, substance abuse treatment, employment training, teen parenting support, tutoring, day care, and transportation.

The second lens through which partnerships are viewed focuses on the actions and skills required to form and support partnerships. It identifies four ways of carrying out interorganizational work: networking, coordinating, cooperating and collaborating. These ways of working are defined by the collective will, skill and resources of the partners and their reasons for working together.

Why Work Together

Dramatic changes in the work environment explain why many organizations are looking to one another for new ways to function. But why are so many willing to reconsider familiar and time-tested structures and enter into partnerships? What's driving organizations as different as educational research and development firms, school reform networks, subject-area collaborations, and county and district offices to challenge traditional norms of self-reliance and build systems to work together? Studies of partnerships point to new demands to:

- *Do more with less.* For educational organizations faced with limited and diminishing resources, partnerships offer ways to expand their capabilities, to operate more efficiently. The sharing of capital, expertise, time, facilities and technology allows individual organizations to conduct business with fewer staff, reduce overhead costs and tap specialized talent when needed. Sharing resources opens opportunities for organizations to create new ventures that their own resource base wouldn't permit and reduces the potential losses associated with duplicated and fragmented efforts.

- *Better meet shifting needs and conditions.* The pace and direction of changes in technology, communications and educational issues demands a nimble response to the service and product needs of clients. Collaborative, partnership-driven structures are flexible, better able to accommodate to swift, far-reaching or even unpredictable changes than organizations with slower-moving bureaucracies. They call for staff to work in interorganizational teams that can form and re-form as tasks shift and in ways that build upon shared competencies and other pooled resources.

- *Create new markets.* Organizations that work together offer a wider reach into new markets or into new segments of established ones. They are more facile than any one organization at continuing to customize work for established clients while breaking into different community, regional, national or even global markets. As school reform becomes increasingly defined as part of the tangled web of pressing family and community issues, educational organizations must be positioned to respond to new markets and a more varied client base.

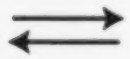
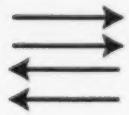
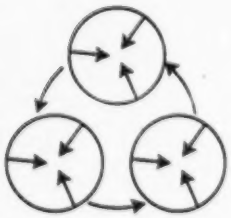
- *Form professional learning communities.* Partnerships are formed because the sum of the parts—the contributions of all the participants—is better able to respond to problems of mutual concern than an organization alone. The knowledge, experience, culture and ways of working that partners bring to the mix is the added value of partnerships. A professional learning community requires an ongoing, generative exchange of ideas about processes for partnering and for tackling educational issues. It's learning with and from one another that keeps partnerships viable and participants committed to working together.

What It Takes to Succeed

Partnerships are complex structures, even risky business for the one in three that forms and then fails. As we gain a better understanding of what they are and why they form, we also learn what it takes for them to succeed. Successful partnerships are attentive to:

- *Establishing a clear, shared sense of direction.* Because partnerships involve the formation of relationships between organizations that retain considerable independence, they can't be "company-driven"—crowding out competition and commanding growing shares of the market. Instead, their orientation must be "market-driven," creating mutual gains by improving the quality and expanding the type of products and services provided. This is what brings partners

Ways of Partnering

Ways of Working	Involvement with Others	Actions	Skills
NETWORKING 	Informal, minimal	Share information	• Listening skills • How to share information • Access to the right people
COORDINATING 	More formal, but organizations still work independently	Exchange ideas and provide access to services and products	• Organizational skills • Team player • Understand organization-specific jargon • Understand the vision and priorities of partners
COOPERATING	Formal, with some integration of work, but organizations still remain autonomous	Develop ideas and norms for working together	•Understand group dynamics • Negotiation skills • Team-building skills • Understand partners' functional mandates • Ability to adjust to organizational change
COLLABORATING 	Formal, with direction provided by an interorganizational governing group; joint endeavors; may be co-mingling of funds	Create structures to facilitate joint development of ideas, services and products, including: shared leadership arrangements, joint decision-making processes, coordinated communication	• Ability to impact or make policy decisions • Access to staff and material resources • Understand organizational development and change process • Facilitation skills • Ability to perform in non-hierarchical structure

Source: adapted Shine-Ring, 1991

together; what binds them is a shared vision and mission and a clear understanding of goals and strategies.

- *Adapting leadership to fit the structure.* Partnerships need to establish a working structure, one that is flatter and more flexible than a conventional hierarchy. This allows for a more frequent and unconstrained flow of information, knowledge, and other shared assets. It also shifts the focus away from controlling employees and operations toward integrating the partnership's functions and ways of working. The role of leadership is defined as facilitating, brokering, and linking, rather than leading in the conventional sense. It requires bringing together different strategic, tactical, operational and cultural attributes to create a new and integrated organization.

- *Encouraging interactivity throughout the system.* In conventional organizations, authority and information typically flow from the top of the system to the bottom. In contrast, effective partnerships rely upon the ongoing, synergistic generation of ideas. To capitalize upon this interactivity, working together requires information to flow informally and from side-to-side and for authority to be dynamic, changing readily and distributed evenly among the participants.

- *Moving from competition toward collaboration.* Since partnerships tend to have ambiguous structures and unpredictable ways of operating, the culture demands an ethic of trust and mutual caring. Partners must value group achievement over individual advancement and collaboration over the struggle for power. Competition undermines diverse organizations working together by disregarding the pact of mutual responsibility for achieving mutual gain.

- *Communicating frequently and effectively.* The nature of partnerships offers both opportunities for productive information sharing and damaging communication breakdowns. Because working together invariably brings up issues of follow-through and authority, participants must be committed to an ongoing dialogue about their relationship, what they are doing, and how problems are addressed. The sense of mutual gain that brings partners together is easily lost when communication fails.

- *Investing time.* For partnerships to succeed, participants must invest sufficient time to establish trusting relationships among the participants. The process of working together — evolving a common agenda, developing and implementing strategies, assessing impact — requires coordination of participants' calendars, ongoing conversations and working to achieve enduring solutions to complex problems.

- *Building strategic relationships.* Partnerships are built for strategic purposes and need the right mix of participants for the right period of time. To succeed, the diversity and interdependencies they generate must strengthen ways of working and create mutual gains.

- *Learning while doing.* Working in partnership is a complex undertaking even for those organizations with considerable experience. They require specific competencies to succeed, skills many organizations don't yet have: resolving conflict effectively, building consensus, thinking systemically about issues and relationships, restructuring time to partner, assessing process-oriented outcomes, and making decisions and solving problems in a collaborative manner. Successful partnerships view the need to learn how to work together as part of the enterprise.

- *Assessing progress.* Successful partnerships develop feedback mechanisms to assess how well structures and activities work and how well products and services serve clients. They set clear, measurable, and realistic objectives and adapt ways of working based upon credible information gathered through evaluation and planning activities.

At a time when schools are fervently working to reinvent themselves for the 21st century, educational partnerships are fast becoming an important and valuable alternative to conventional ways to catalyze and support school reform. Their real promise is the way they create

professional communities by encouraging ideas, resources and talents to flow "in and out of organizations, up and down hierarchies, and across geographic boundaries." They are today's hope for sharing and solving our most pressing problems.

* * *

As we continue to work with our partners throughout the region, WestEd will gain a deeper understanding of what partnerships are and more first-hand experience in what it takes for them to succeed. Our challenges and successes will be shared with others as part of our ongoing commitment to work to create schools as innovative and effective places to learn and teach.

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WestEd is committed to creating schools that equip all students, especially those most underserved, with the skills and capabilities to lead satisfying, productive lives. We play a pivotal role in school reform by translating the best research into practice, providing state-of-the-art knowledge and assistance and promoting the kind of risk-taking that leads to real change.

WestEd serves as the regional education laboratory for Arizona, California, Nevada and Utah.

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